

College Preparation: Writing College Essays

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Time Frame 60-120 session(s)

Essential Question(s)

What characteristics make a a good essay?

Summary

Students engage in activities that explore the characteristics of good college admission/scholarship essays. Then, using the generated list, they create a personal outline for a college admissions essay.

Learning Goals

- Students will identify good characteristics of college admission/scholarship essays.
- Students will write a personal outline for a college admissions essay.

Attachments

- Characteristics of a Well-Written College Essay—Writing College Essays.pdf
- College Admissions Essay Presentation Handout—Writing College Essays.pdf
- College Essay 1—Writing College Essays.pdf
- College Essay 2—Writing College Essays.pdf
- Essay One Outline Example—Writing College Essays.pdf
- Essay Outline—Writing College Essays.pdf
- Essay Template - Activity Outside of the Classroom—Writing College Essays.pdf
- Essay Template - Influential Person—Writing College Essays.pdf
- Essay Template - Issue of Importance—Writing College Essays.pdf
- Lesson Slides—Writing College Essays.pptx
- Teachers Guide for College Essays 1 and 2—Writing College Essays.pdf

Materials

- Lesson Slides (attached)
- Characteristics of a Well-Written College Essay handout (attached; one per student)
- College Essay 1 (attached; one per student)
- College Essay 2 (attached; one per student)
- Teacher's Guide to Essay 1 and 2 (attached; optional)
- Essay Outline (attached; one per student)
- Essay One Outline Example (attached; optional)
- Essay Template - Issue of Importance (attached; optional)
- Essay Template - Activity Outside of the Classroom (attached; optional)
- Essay Template - Influential Person (attached; optional)
- Paper and pencils
- Whiteboard or writing surface

Engage

Start with **slide 2** to introduce the topic “College Admissions Essay: It’s not just what you say but how you say it”. Show **slides 3-4** to introduce the essential question and lesson objectives.

Switch to **slide 5**. Ask students to first think about what characteristics are needed to create a good essay. Have them fill out the attached **Characteristics of a Well-Written College Essay** handout, or, if you like, have them write "What are the characteristics of a well-written college admissions/scholarship essay?" at the top of their page then jot down their ideas on that paper.

Explore

Show **slide 6**. Give each student a copy of the attached handouts **College Essay 1** and **College Essay 2**.

Teacher's Note

These essays are good examples of a college essay. Let students know this before they start reading so they can focus on finding strengths. Note that all of the essays and templates may be modified to meet the needs, experiences, and interests of your students.

As students read, instruct them to use the Why-Lighting strategy to highlight or annotate sections that make these essays good examples of a college essay.

After reading the example essays, students will add characteristics that they noted to their original list.

Possible Characteristics

Students might recognize the strength of these essays in regard to the way they focus on the prompt, their economy of language, or the manner in which they convey their sense of humor.

Explain

Show **slide 7**. Have students get with a partner to share the lists they've created and add to their lists based on what their partner shares. Next, student pairs should get with another student pair (creating a group/team of four) to share their lists. Again, they will add to their personal lists based on what their group shares.

Change to **slide 8**. Using the lists they've created, the groups will have a brainstorm relay. Create a master list as groups take turns offering items from their lists until they run out of ideas. No repeats! The group with the most items wins.

Teacher Note

Write Group 1, Group 2, etc. (as many as is needed) on the board. When a group shares out from their list, write their answer under their group heading to keep a tally of which group has shared what and which group shared the most answers.

After the master lists are completed, display the feedback from the exemplar essays shown on **slide 9**. After reading the feedback for essay 1, have students look back at the essay for examples of cohesive structure, elegant style (ask students what they think that means), details, and specificity. Have a short, whole-class discussion about what they find.

Teacher's Note

The attached **Teacher's Guide for College Essay 1 and 2** handout contains specific examples found in each essay.

Next, display the feedback for essay 2 shown on **slide 10**. Have students look back at the essay and discuss how the author shows, rather than tells, the reader what he is passionate about. Have a short, whole-class discussion about what they find.

Explicitly explain to students that anything they should add anything they learned from the feedback to the essays. Explain to students that they will use the master lists they've created, as well as the feedback examples, during the next activity as they begin composing their own personal college scholarship/admissions essays.

Extend

While showing **slide 11**, have students choose one the following three common college admission prompts:

- Describe an influential person in your life.
- Discuss an activity outside of the classroom.
- Discuss an issue that is important to you.

After students choose a prompt, change to the final slide. Have them use the attached **Essay Outline** handout to create a draft similar to the attached **Essay One Outline Example**. The outlines should be informed by the list they compiled during this session.

Teacher's Note

If students are struggling to create an outline for their topic, have them complete an essay template (see attached templates: **Essay Template - Issue of Importance**, **Essay Template - Activity Outside of the Classroom**, or **Essay Template - Influential Person**) that matches their chosen topic. These templates are meant to foster ideas for students struggling with their essay, and to help all students create an outline for their final essay.

Warning!

Please make sure students know that if they rely heavily on these templates in their final draft, they will write one of the worst admissions essays possible. They should only use these templates to get their own creative juices flowing.

Evaluate

After students have finished their outline, have them share with a critical friend if time permits. Otherwise, the outline can serve as a formative assessment.

Follow-up Activities

Students will use these outlines to guide and inform their college admissions/scholarship essays. Before any student essay is submitted to a college or scholarship, teachers should follow up with students, encouraging them to find a critical friend to peer review and suggest edits before submission. Students should also be encouraged to find a teacher or adult who might be able to read and provide feedback to any edited peer reviewed essay. Once these reviews and edits are complete, students may submit their essays to colleges or scholarships.

Research Rationale

Students who attend college after graduation and complete a four-year degree enjoy greater job satisfaction and better quality of life post-graduation, and college graduates have significantly better opportunities for upward career mobility and earning a living wage (Okerson, 2016). College readiness is a process, not a program. The reasons students do not matriculate to college are many and varied (King, 2012). To mitigate the college-going gap, high school students need both support and assistance in preparing for and attending college (Radcliffe & Bos, 2013; King, 2012; Sherwin, 2012). College admission processes are complex. Many students have no idea where to begin. King (2012) and Sherwin (2012) both notice students' need for appropriate steps and guidance to make sense of college entrance. Applying for financial aid and scholarships, navigating college admission requirement, participating in ACT and SAT workshops, writing the college admission essay , and securing needed recommendations are all college processes that often hamper students in securing admission. Alvarado and An (2015), Belasco (2012), and King (2012) all found that minority students, first-generation college applicants, and students whose families have low socioeconomic status (SES) rely more heavily on their schools for guidance. Therefore by providing students an intentional opportunity to understand the necessity of college essays and how to write them, will help create a college-going culture within the school and establish clear expectations that all students have the ability and opportunity to attend college.

Resources

- Alvarado, S. E. & An, B. P. (2015). Race, friends, and college readiness: Evidence from the high school longitudinal study. Journal of Race and Social Problems, 7(2), 150-167.
- Belasco, A. (2013). Creating college opportunity: School counselors and their influence on postsecondary enrollment. Research in Higher Education, 54(7), 781-804.
- International Student. (2017). Sample college admission essays. Retrieved from https://www.internationalstudent.com/essay_writing/college_essay/
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- K20 Center. (n.d.). Why-lighting. Instructional Strategy. Retrieved from https://learn.k20center.ou.edu/strategy/d9908066f654727934df7bf4f505e7d5
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- Radcliffe, R. & Bos, B. (2013). Strategies to prepare middle school and high school students for college and career readiness. The Clearing House, 86, 136-141.
- Sherwin, J. (2012). Make me a match: Helping low-income and first-generation students make good college choices (Policy brief). Retrieved from https:// www.mdrc.org/publication/make-me-match